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How to cite:

Butcher, John; McPherson, Elaine; Shelton, Isobel; Clarke, Anactoria; Hills, Laura and Hughes, Jonathan (2017). Unfit for purpose? Rethinking the language of assessment for Widening Participation students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 19(2) pp. 27–46.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.5456/WPLL.19.2.27>

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Unfit for purpose? Rethinking the language of assessment for Widening Participation students

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Abstract This article explores learning from a scholarship project which sought to identify principles of best inclusive practice in the language of assessment. Our focus was on an Access Programme, aimed at preparing entry-level learners to succeed in HE. Drawing on assessment principles of fairness and equity (QAA, 2012), the project challenged the ‘assimilation’ required by non-traditional learners in current assessment practices (Hockings 2010, Williams et al, 2014). An iterative mixed methods approach was conducted to elicit student and tutor perceptions and analyse existing documentation. Findings highlighted important pragmatic and conceptual issues around the language of assessment. In practical terms our Programme Assessment Guides are being redesigned and re-written for greater clarity. More fundamentally, we argue the opportunity to re-think the purpose of assessment on Access to embed more inclusive language could offer the sector an holistic approach to retaining students from groups under-represented in HE, and supporting their success.

Key words Assessment; Inclusive Language; Access; Widening Participation; Entry level HE; Barriers to HE success

Introduction

In the UK, the last 20 years have seen policy-makers and many individual institutions of Higher Education pay far greater attention to attracting a more diverse student body, especially from those groups traditionally under-represented in higher education (HE). This has resulted in massification in terms of access to and participation in HE study (Sambell and Hubbard, 2004). However, issues of retention, achievement and progression for so-called ‘Widening Participation’ (WP) students remain problematic (Byrne & Cushing, 2015; Knox, 2005). A range of barriers faced by students from such backgrounds have been consistently reported in the literature (Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2006; Newman-Ford et al, 2010), particularly a lack of academic preparedness which, combined with some non-traditional students’ lack of self-belief and self-efficacy, can result in disproportionate levels of withdrawal.

It is regrettable that, too often, the response to this stubborn retention problem has been to pathologise WP students as requiring ‘deficit’ models of learning support. The research reported here took a more critical starting point – that aspects of the pedagogic environment itself were an unnecessary obstacle for WP students. Our hypothesis was that a smarter approach to retention, one which sought to intervene to change institutional culture, rather than fit square pegs into a round hole (Butcher et al, 2010), might offer a more inclusive and holistic solution.

The authors all work at the Open University in the UK, teaching on a distance learning Access Programme (30 credits at Level 0, additional preparation which does not ‘count’ towards an undergraduate qualification), aimed at part-time adult learners (a key under-represented group in UK HE). Over 4000 students a year register on our three Access modules, aiming (as students tell us) to take a tentative first step into HE. Each module, which lasts 30 weeks, is designed to support the development of study confidence in adult learners, many of whom enter with low prior qualifications. Students can use their studies on Access as an additional preparatory starting point in all the OU’s undergraduate qualifications. As distance learners, students receive a hard copy (paper) Assessment Guide, detailing three formative

assignments, six short formative computer marked quizzes and a final summative assignment.

Demographic data from the seven presentations of Access since 2013 suggests the modules attract a far higher proportion of students from the lowest socio-economic groups than traditionally found in HE, a higher proportion declaring a disability, and a far higher proportion starting with low prior qualifications (in the UK, fewer than the standard two A levels). In targeting WP students, the Programme has not been immune to the challenge of poor retention - around 65% of students registering on Access complete and pass their module. This figure is affected by higher withdrawal rates among students (60% of our cohort) who qualify for a full fee waiver due to their low household income. We are aware, from previous financial support scheme data, that students who contribute just a token amount to their studies are more likely to persist.

The Programme team have investigated a number of interventions to enhance retention in recent years, but the initial idea for this research was prompted by feedback from one of our external examiners. She reported that the language used in the Assessment Guide for our Science, maths and technology module (Y033) used clearer, more straightforward and more direct language to explain assessment than the other two modules: Arts and languages (Y031); and People, work and society (Y032). She suggested that the different disciplines could learn from each other and that the other two modules might find ways of simplifying instructions to learners commencing their studies with Access. This comment identified in particular those students lacking confidence in academic literacy, or those with a background in which English was an Additional Language (tutors report this latter group has increased in recent years, and often require additional support around assessment tasks).

The Access Programme team successfully bid for a small amount of internal funding from the Open University's Learning & Teaching Centre (Assessment Project) to conduct a piece of scholarship investigating the language of assessment on its Access modules. The team embarked on a year-long mixed methods study to explore the extent to which the language of assessment (defined by us as the wording of tasks, the written guidance, the generic written advice, and the 'assumptions' communicated about assessment) was 'fit-for-purpose' for entry level, new to HE students, the majority of whom came from WP backgrounds.

To fully explore the impact of the language of assessment on Access learners, we engaged with both students, and tutors, to consider the impact on learners' developing assessment literacy. The focus on Level 0 enabled us to compare assessment language within a shared Access framework but with the three modules covering very different subject areas. Understanding and definitions of what the 'language of assessment' meant has evolved as the project went on, and examining the issues raised in the process of gathering feedback has encouraged the team to take a much wider view. While our starting point had been the wording of the printed Assessment Guides, by the end of the project we were convinced the issue (which we strongly believe is under-examined in the sector) included the whole concept and purpose of assessment on Access (entry Level 0), and its relationship to the retention of WP students.

Literature

The team conducted a critical review of the relevant academic literature around the language of assessment, including a limited amount of previous OU scholarship. We drew on key emerging themes to shape the subsequent data collection. The scholarship was informed initially by a review of key conceptualisations of inclusivity/exclusion in relation to the literature of HE assessment. While little has been written specifically on the language of assessment in relation to access to HE for students from WP backgrounds, five relevant themes emerged in the literature which helped structure our thinking and our approach to data collection:

1. First, in relation to meeting the needs of WP students, assessment principles of fairness and equity (QAA, 2012) are needed to challenge any inequalities in current assessment practice. This is particularly represented by the perceived assumption that those students entering HE with low or non-traditional prior qualifications need to 'assimilate' to current HE assessment practices (Hockings 2010, Williams et al, 2014). Issues of gender, language background and culturally appropriate assessment are raised in the context of Australia (Logan & Hazel, 1999) and New Zealand (Johnston, 2010). The danger represented by language is of 'collateral damage' to WP students, who can initially feel lost or inadequate in relation to HE assessment (Sambell & Hubbard, 2004). These insights opened up important questions around the extent to which the existing language of assessment itself (see below) presented an obstacle to students from a WP background.

2. Second, studies of inclusive, holistic or alternative HE assessment methods, aimed at disabled students or indigenous learners, increasingly position such approaches to assessment as beneficial to most learners. This addresses the prevalent fear in universities of 'dumbing-down' assessment (University of Plymouth, 2015a). The idea of introducing learner choice in assessment, as well as the potential for a more personalised assessment system (University of Plymouth, 2015b), could better meet the needs of WP students generally, who are less likely than traditional students to be building on positive experiences of assessment from school or college.
3. Third, although there is little in the plethora of studies devoted to academic literacies specific to assessment, there are a small number of articles which explore the need for WP students to join unfamiliar 'discourse communities' around assessment literacy. Vardi (2013) emphasises the interrelatedness of disciplinary language in assessment, Smith et al (2013) advocate support for the development of assessment literacy, and Lizzio & Wilson (2013) highlight the need to understand students' perceptions of assessment if they are unfamiliar with the culture of university assessment. The notion that WP students may be additionally disadvantaged in terms of their grasp of assessment literacy offers an important pointer towards the need to better understand all the barriers faced by non-traditional students entering HE.
4. Fourth, a study of inclusive language in assessment (Butcher et al, 2010) suggests a positive benefit to students from WP backgrounds. Inclusive language should be promoted to counter the 'uncommonsense' language of academic assessment (Donohue & Coffin, 2014), particularly when students are reported to adhere to a common sense understanding of the verbs used in assessment tasks (Williams, 2005). It is interesting that we have received feedback from colleagues at a number of universities that they recognise the lack of inclusive language in HE assessment as an issue, but address it by providing glossaries aimed at students to shed light on the 'technical' dimensions of the language of assessment in their institutions. This approach is criticised by Richards & Pilcher (2014) who argue for the benefit of a shared understanding (an anti-glossary) of key terms between students and lecturers. Arguably, this shared understanding between educator and learner is also inhibited by the unequal power relations that exist in academia and are inherent in the discourse. Too often, learners, have things done to 'them', rather than participating in their own learning, being agents of their own success.

We are increasingly convinced that the language of assessment should be more transparent for all students, and more inclusive. Frankly, in our view, if the language of assessment needs a glossary we should reflect on why that is and improve the accessibility and clarity of the language used in the first place.

Previous scholarship at the OU has produced guidance for faculties on how to support students in the transition from the practice of their own subject area (for example nursing) to the more theorised academic study of that subject (Open University, 2015a). Other scholarship has included a checklist on the elements which produce good academic writing (Open University, 2015b, see also Roberts, 2011; Preece & Godfrey, 2004). However, in such instances the focus was on the language students used in responding to assessment tasks, rather than the language of the assessment tasks themselves.

5. Finally, Boud & Falchikov (2006) argue for a tripartite understanding of assessment: of learning; for learning; for lifelong learning. Engaging with this literature provoked an unexpectedly self-critical reflection on the part of the Programme team. It became increasingly apparent to us that one of the issues on our Access Programme may have been that, inadvertently, we had adopted the language of assessment of learning, even for our formative tasks. For unconfident entry students, a language of assessment for (lifelong) learning, in which students develop the capacity to judge their own work and understand the use of assessment as a tool they can use to improve their learning, would have been far more accessible. Increasingly, we also suspect utilising a language of assessment for learning would be a far more appropriate, supportive and effective entry approach to HE for WP students.

The literature informed the project's exploration of a more inclusive language in assessment tasks and their associated guidance. As a result, we explored a wide range of questions about the scope and purpose of assessment on Access with students, tutors, and in the documentation we provided.

Methodology

In order to explore the extent to which the language of assessment presented an obstacle to WP students, we sought to understand the actuality of assessment discourses through the experiences and perceptions of Access students. Our methodological starting point was thus to engage with those most affected by the language of assessment on Access - our students. To complement and triangulate this student voice, we also sought insights from our cohort of Access tutors who assess and provide assessment feedback to students. We then explored guidance about assessment that is provided for students. Data was collected in a series of five iterative stages.

1. Initially, an online survey was distributed to a single cohort of Access students. This was administered through the OU's Institute of Educational Technology (and submitted through standard Student Research Panel ethical protocols). 741 Access students were invited to take part, with two subsequent email reminders, resulting in a 23% response rate (168 students). This survey explored issues around clarity of understanding in assessment questions and associated guidance.
2. We then analysed a sample of student scripts from all three modules (two scripts for each of 22 tutors on Y031; 30 on Y033; and half the tutors (32) on the most popular module Y032. We chose to sample scores between 68 (good) and 39 (borderline fail) with a mean of 50, and the tutor feedback provided on them, to establish where marks were lost (for example, if a task had been omitted, or comparisons avoided). We attempted to establish the extent to which the language in which the assessment tasks were written might have hindered student engagement and success. We also reviewed the language in our Tutor Marking Guidelines, comparing the three Access Modules Y031, Y032 and Y033 in order to better understand any misalignment with the language used in the students' Assessment Guides.
3. Third, we digitally recorded 'phone interviews with tutors across all three Access modules, conducting nine in total: three with Y031 tutors, three with Y032 tutors and three with Y033 tutors, each of whom had long experience of supporting entry level students. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and recordings were transcribed promptly by a professional transcriber. This generated 91 pages of data.
4. Fourth, we explored qualitative responses to the University's annual module evaluation surveys, analysing data on critical assessment points across all three Access modules by focussing on three questions relevant to the language of assessment. (Around 20% of Access

students submit responses to the institution-wide evaluation survey, which goes out to all students who complete an OU module).

5. Finally, we explored the language employed in Access Assessment Guides ‘afresh’, examining the booklets for the Access module Y031, Y032 and Y033 using comparative discourse analysis, focussing on both the Access generic skeleton and the module-specific content. We used two workshop opportunities in national tutor staff development events to further explore the assessment language in the guides. We observed tutors discussing perceptions of the language used on ‘unfamiliar’ (not their module) first assignments: two groups of Y033 tutors examined assessment on Y031, three from Y031 examined assessment on Y032, and three from Y032 examined assessment Y033. Scrutinising an approach familiar from the overall Access Programme, but on an unfamiliar module, was designed to ‘de-familiarise’ the tutors, so that they would engage with the language of assessment in the manner students new to university study might.

The scholarship team (six academics across different disciplines with a shared interest in Access issues) analysed the data by identifying and coding key themes and comparing them. An internal report was produced for the funders, and findings have been disseminated externally and internally at each stage.

Findings

We have identified four key findings:

1. WP student anxieties about the language of assessment

The online student survey generated data in relation to the connection between the language of assessment and the progressive demands of Assignments 01 to 03, in that decreasing proportions of Y031 and Y032 students described instructions as ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to understand. While a significant majority of students (97% Y033, 94% Y032, 88% Y031) felt that the instructions for the assessments were ‘clearly or ‘very clearly’ written, the proportion of students who felt either ‘confident’ or ‘very confident’ that they had understood what they needed to do for each assignment was lower (85% Y033, 79% Y032, 74% Y031). This appears to support the issue raised by the external examiner in relation to differences between the Access Modules. Four main issues were reported:

- The range of different approaches to the language of assessment on a multi-discipline module: this confused students and different approaches were reported as requiring repeated reading to clarify meaning. It should be understood that each Access module was designed deliberately as a cross-disciplinary learning experience. For example, Y032 introduces learners to six disciplines, each employing a different register, different threshold concepts and different expectations. For students across the Programme, there appeared to be a tension between being offered a range of discipline ‘tasters’ within an Access module to assist them in selecting the best-fit qualification pathway for them, and the consequent confusion when different disciplines carry very different assumptions about the language in which assessment is introduced.
- Unfamiliarity with the ‘type’ of language experienced in HE: this is an important dimension of the WP student experience on entering HE, and illustrates the urgent need for institutions to develop assessment literacy amongst students, rather than assuming that the academic language of assessment is already understood, in particular by students from a WP background. One student commented:

“I understand that formal and academic English is essential for University studies guide books, but maybe for an Access module, since it is the very first, initiating module, a little simpler language would be better and easier to understand...I am certain I achieved lower marks because I did not fully understand the criteria.”
(Student response to survey).

- Being overwhelmed by the amount of instructions: it was a wake-up call for us to acknowledge that one of our Assessment Guides was 51 pages long and that this was a barrier to engagement. Our ‘guidance’ was overly expansive and counter-productive:

“The words are clear generally but the overall effect of the words led to confusion occasionally because the sentences just go on and on in long paragraphs...the main problem is there is so much information that it is hard to take it all in and follow it.” (Student response to survey).

- The English as an Additional Language (EAL) problem: students for whom English was not their first language reported not grasping the nuances of meaning in key assessment tasks.

“It was hard to understand at first but I think it is because English is not my native language...” (Student response to survey).

Data for Y033 (the Science, maths and technology Access module) provided some support for the external examiner comment that prompted this scholarship, in that fewer students on Y033 reported finding the formative assignments and end of module summative assignment hard to understand, and fewer were unclear how they are going to be assessed. Unfortunately, the online survey comments did not provide many clues as to why this was so.

Though tutor support did not get mentioned as a factor by Y033 students, open comments included in the student survey responses for Y031 (Arts and languages Access module) and Y032 (People, work and society Access module) emphasised the crucial significance of tutor support in building confidence and navigating the assessments. This suggests the language of assessment associated with those two modules was not as accessible as it could have been, and needed more mediation or support by tutors.

2. Assumptions about academic language, compounded by over-wordy ‘guidance’ confuses WP students

Three distinct issues emerged during our interviews with Access tutors. The most fundamental point was that ‘Students would rather not have the assessments!’ This may be true for many students in many situations. Tutors recognised that some students find any assessment stressful and difficult when they are new to it and need to become accustomed to the assessment processes. However, perhaps this comment should be taken particularly seriously at Access level given that many students’ previous experiences of education and assessment may not have been particularly successful. It suggests that we need to better persuade our Access students about the value of assessment for learning, and what a powerful tool it can be to help them take charge of their own studies. Looking back at our previous Assessment Guides through this filter led us to see that, despite our best intentions, most of our advice was telling students *how* to do the assessment rather than *why* they would want to do so. To some extent this gap was being filled by tutors who commented that their role was ‘to help demystify’ the assignments. On

reflection, we wondered why we had sought to ‘mystify’ Access assessment in the first place.

However, tutors did not feel students stopped studying and withdrew because of the language of assessment – they reported students may be anxious about ‘getting it right’ but assessment was only one factor in a student abandoning study, especially if a student had other complex needs (although it could be the final straw). This illustrated the need to build a wider consideration of the purpose of assessment at Access (entry) level, especially in relation to building confidence.

The second significant issue raised during tutor interviews was around the use of academic language in the assignment questions and the guidance. One comment included the idea that:

“...students understand the words...[but]... need to get their heads round what they mean in an academic context...” (Tutor interview).

A student noted:

“Work is assessed according to marking guidelines which is [sic] provided by the module team...” (Student response to survey)

The tutors commented that students particularly struggled with process or task words (for example, a Y032 tutor identified ‘describe’, or ‘explain’, or ‘develop an argument’ as being problematic). Although we had endeavoured to support students by unpicking some of the obviously difficult ideas and terms in the guidance, there were familiar words that we used in a different way. For example, the word ‘meet’ in ‘...to meet the learning outcomes...’ is quite easily understood by academics and we know that it does not imply that a student should say ‘hello’ to the learning outcomes! However one comment from a student picked out the word ‘meet’ as being one that was used in a particularly unexpected way from its normal usage. We could express the same idea as ‘...satisfy the learning outcomes...’ but again the word ‘satisfy’ is being used quite differently than the way it is used in everyday speech. If we impose the need to think about how each word in the assignments is used (in an academic sense versus an everyday sense), a significant obstacle is presented to all learners, but especially those from a WP background who are new to HE.

The confusion experienced by WP students was also revealed through analysis of assignment scripts and tutor feedback. A lack of clarity in the guidance about expectations of student work resulted in marks being lost through:

- Unclear presentation.
- Inaccurate referencing.
- Not including a task or avoiding comparison when required.
- Simple irrelevance (not answering a question).

This is perhaps unsurprising, with findings aligning with data from tutor interviews, in that there is not necessarily difficulty in the wording of the assessment task, but rather students' understanding of what is needed – which is what the Access Programme seeks to develop in entry-level learners. Disciplinary assumptions on Y031 (Arts and languages) around 'techniques' and 'effects' appeared to be problematic for weaker students, and on Y032 (People, work and society) tutor expectations around assessing 'analysis' were often met by students 'describing'. Specific issues on Y033 (Science, technology and maths) seem to be student anxiety around Maths workings, and the setting-out conventions required. This suggests a need for greater clarity and transparency in expectations around assessment expectations in the discipline at entry level.

The third issue which came up during several tutor interviews was the length of the assignment questions and the length of the guidance material, which we had intended to be helpful, but which became apparent could lead to students feeling 'overwhelmed'. These were students who were likely to already be finding assessment stressful. Tutors identified guidance being 'wordy' and that this was an obstacle to understanding. Some tutors saw specific language issues with the wording of some guidance and tasks – essentially, in guidance which 'answered the question' for students and 'overwhelmed' them (although this was not raised as an issue on Y033, which may support the original contention by the external examiner). Unclear advice on referencing and word counts also caused anxiety. We were able to follow-up these insights when we came to analysing the language in our Assessment Guides.

Student feedback comments on the language used around assessment were scrutinised through the institutional evaluation data, and as might be expected from students who have successfully completed their Access module, the responses tended to be positive around clarity of instructions, exhibiting

lower anxiety around assessment than reported from the tutors interviewed. However, issues were again apparent in some responses around wordy and unclear guidance (especially on the third assignment and the end of module assignment): for some students, this was an obstacle to effective engagement with the assessment task:

“Some of the syntax on a few of the questions were confusing and made a relatively straight forward question into a very ambiguous one.” (Student response to survey).

The lack of confidence felt by WP students was compounded for some by a perceived ‘positioning’ beneath the all-powerful university:

“It is hard because of my lack of academia studies as opposed to the way the OU want it...” (Student response to survey).

3. ‘Bloody learning outcomes’

The whole idea of learning outcomes, as well as the way that the learning outcomes were phrased, was identified as particularly problematic by both students and tutors, including confusion over the difference between learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Tutors specifically commented that the wording of the learning outcomes needed to be simplified. Drawing on data from student survey responses and analysis of our Assessment Guides, we were struck by issues around clarity of language, and the unacknowledged use of academic signifiers (for example, the use of ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ in assessment criteria without explaining what they meant.

Our Assessment Guides focused on the structure of the module, emphasising the importance of the four generic ‘learning outcomes’. Students were told that they need ‘to achieve’ or ‘meet’ the learning outcomes but there was limited explanation of the rationale for them:

- **L01 knowledge and understanding.** This outcome informed students that they ‘should use appropriate terminology as necessary’. Assumptions were made that students will know what we meant by ‘appropriate terminology’ and we now acknowledge that examples of some key concepts relevant to each of the units would be useful.
- **L02 Cognitive skills.** Students ‘should demonstrate...the following cognitive skills’. There is no attempt to explain the differences between them and that some are higher level than others. For

example, students may be able to ‘describe’ at the start of the module, but would work towards ‘evaluation’ or ‘assessment’ by the end of the module, a higher level skill.

- **L03 Key skills.** Among other skills, the Assessment Guides suggest that students ‘can use IT as a vehicle for learning’, but for some of our learners who still may not have had access to a computer, this may seem both daunting and excluding. It would be far more effective to provide some specific examples of why this might be a useful skill, from constructing Word Documents as an essay writing tool, with the facility to spell check, to use of the Internet to access online reference material from a variety of sources.
- **L04 Practical and professional skills.** Much reference is made to reflective tasks, but there is no explanation of the purpose of reflection, or the advantage of becoming a reflective practitioner.

4. Did we really write that?

Reviewing the three module Assessment Guides enabled us to bring a fresh pair of eyes to what can be a taken-for-granted approach in HE. For example, it was felt that our Programme-wide generic opening could be considered unwelcoming and unhelpful, in that the language used set a tone that student engagement in assessment was purely about passing, and that assessment was a rule-bound process imposed on students for the purpose of awarding grades and credits. The discourse was about regulations, cut-off dates, learning outcomes and marking bands. Students new to study at this level, who may have experienced ‘failure’ in assessment previously, or not have encountered assessment for many years, are confronted quite early with technical assessment terms, some complex sentences and a potentially confusing rationale for learning outcomes. We surprised ourselves that this procedural/bureaucratic tone was also found in the interactive computer-marked quiz guidance, and in instructions on how to submit work. Both contributed to an assessment paradigm which we reluctantly can conceptualise as an ‘official’ power relationship, and one expressed in unnecessarily dense language. Thus it appears our Access students had been unintendedly located as the object of assessment, rather than as active participants in a fully-scaffolded assessment process in support of learning.

Two staff development workshops enabled Access tutors to engage with the language of the first assignment in a module different to their own. This

produced some powerful results, with tutors highlighting ambiguities in the wording of assessment tasks and inconsistencies in guidance, which could contribute to learner confusion. There were felt to be opacities in the language used in all three assignments, and a tendency to use long and complex sentences which could overwhelm Access students. Specific terms such as 'engaged' and 'explain' were reported as being employed without explanation, and therefore could increase the anxiety prompted by encountering unfamiliar language. Reference to the learning outcomes was reported as varying considerably, and requiring students to explicitly look up those relevant to the assignment.

Barriers to clear understanding were often linked to command words (for example, as tutors suggested, 'analyse', or 'evaluate' in Y031 - Arts and languages - assessment tasks), and gaps in cognitive understanding. As a result, it appeared Access students needed to do a lot of decoding to understand the 'rules of the assessment game'.

Conclusion

This scholarship began with a slightly naïve aspiration: if we could share best practice through adopting a more inclusive language of assessment across our three Access modules, we might have a positive impact on retention. Drawing on data from student survey responses and interviews with tutors, we soon found ourselves re-visiting the fundamental purpose of assessment for entry-level students, and exploring specific issues around assessment literacy for WP students.

The data did not all necessarily point in the same direction. For example, the student survey did offer some support for the assertion made by the external examiner that Y033 (Science, technology and maths) used clearer language in the questions in the Assessment Guides. However other sources, such as the analysis of assignments and tutor feedback, located issues with the guidance rather than the questions. There were a range of perspectives, and the relationship between the language of assessment and retention more widely, was not correlated directly. However, we felt the language of assessment, and the characterisation of assessment as 'of' learning rather than 'for' learning, contributed to the complex obstacles faced by WP students, which could inhibit student progress and in some cases contribute to withdrawal.

Despite the fact that the three modules in the OU Access Programme were designed with the needs of WP students in mind, it appeared that the deployment of the language of assessment (commonly used across HE) in the Access Assessment Guides had been ill-considered. We concluded WP students were likely to be disadvantaged by the assessment language on Access, for three reasons: it carried too many implicit assumptions (cultural capital); it fetishized technical vocabulary and thus excluded unconfident entry-level learners; it obfuscated at the expense of more inclusive clarity. So, even though much thought (and expertise) went into producing teaching materials and a tutoring model which was intended to be ‘fit-for-purpose’ for adult students embarking on HE at Level 0, the language in which assessment was expressed may have acted as a barrier to learning, an obstacle to student engagement and, in some cases contributed to withdrawal.

Our scholarship thus culminated in a far more fundamental reappraisal and reconceptualization of the purpose of assessment at Level 0, challenging how we should talk about assessment for Access learners. A comprehensive review of assessment at Access level is underway, so students not only understand better what they are being asked to do, but have a much clearer idea of why they should do it, and what the benefits are. The practical outcome is a radically deconstructed set of new Assessment Guides, driven by principles of accessibility/inclusivity and fitness for entry-level learners, deliberately stepping away from prevailing HE quality paradigms which seem to position students as the objects of assessment policies, and instead innovating in the use of language to more clearly communicate the purpose of HE assessment. We recognise tutors are crucial in supporting students to become ‘assessment-literate’, and seek to re-position assessment on Access as a key tool for learning with the aim of helping students, particularly from WP backgrounds, to succeed.

While amendments and enhancements to the language of assessment in tasks and guidance in the Access Assessment Guides may go some way to addressing concerns raised about inaccessible language, such efforts in themselves may not prevent the withdrawal of WP students in the context of wider personal and learning issues. We consider it important though that the language in which tasks are framed acknowledges the need to assimilate disadvantaged groups into HE discourses.

Recommendations

For policy-makers and institutions committed to widening participation, we recommend far greater attention is paid to the language of assessment. For example, there should be more explicit recognition of the purpose of assessment at entry level, so that the approach to the use of academic language is clear for WP students in particular. A fundamental review of the purpose of assessment at L0 and/or L4 could shift the focus of assessment away from compliance with University regulations, to ensuring that WP students understand how assessment supports their learning.

In addition, if institutions could utilise more inclusive language in assessment tasks and associated guidance, this would support and scaffold acculturation into HE discourses. WP students would then better understand the ‘rules of the game’, through modification of some discipline-specific vocabulary (decoding process words) and currently confusing references to learning outcomes. At present, if students are left to surmise what is required of them, they are less likely to prosper. Greater alignment between the language of assessment employed in guidance should be implemented and monitored, especially as learners progress through the module to more demanding tasks.

Further research

Our scholarship did not ‘drill-down’ into the impact of assessment language on barriers faced by specific disadvantaged groups, other than identifying issues with students for whom English was an additional Language. We wonder if the language of assessment is a contributing factor to the BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) achievement gap across UK HE? Further research would be welcome on the tension between ‘home’ language vs. HE language, and this would be relevant to all students who are not from white middle class backgrounds.

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Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to our colleague, Dr Stefanie Sinclair, who was involved in the original scholarship and data collection.